2: Mitchell E-5 (1946-1949) 1956 FT7 Yao FT7



121 But I have used illustrative material from other villages where it was more complete or less confusing. In Appendices, I set out genealogies, hut censuses, and plans, of the two villages. In the text I use reference numbers in these genealogies, by generation and position in generations, to identify people.

It is necessary to select illustrations because the structural uniformities I wish to describe are often hidden by the idiosyncrasies of particular examples. The general principles of social structure, as I present them here, have been abstracted from my observations over a period of two years, not only in Cikoja and Ali Kasmka villages, but in many others in the Machinga area. I present my illustrations not with any belief that they prove my analysis but only to help the reader set the principles I describe in the reality of Yao life.

## The Field Work

123 I spent the first two weeks of my stay in Nyasaland talking over my proposed field work with the Administrative officers of the Nyasaland Government. The Provincial Commissioner suggested that I should do a round trip of the Yao area with the District Commissioner at Zomba. After this tour, in consultation with Chief Kawinga and the District Commissioner, I decided that the best place for me to start would be in Chief Chiwale's area. The District Commissioner then took me to Chiwale who indicated a site in his court-village where I could pitch my tent.

124 For the first week I held meetings with the chief and some of the older men of the vicinity and spent most of my time making notes on material culture, 'customs' and history. On the first page of my notes I find that there is a good description of Yao beliefs in sorcery, all described as if it were in the past: a full year was to pass before my informants were prepared to admit that these beliefs were still held. After a week or two of this
123 general activity I decided to try my first village census. The
125 results were hardly encouraging. Often when villagers knew
203 I was coming they slipped away into the bush. Those who were left frequently refused steadfastly to answer my questions. Many rumours arose to explain my presence. I heard, for example, that I had been sent by the Government to record the names of those to be taken away as soldiers for the next

2: Mitchell E-5 (1946-1949) 1956 FT7 Yao FT7



war. I heard that I was an American spy, and also that I was a spy for the Portuguese, because Nyasaland, or at least the Yao area of it, was going to become part of Mozambique. I spent much of my enforced idleness during these early months copying down texts in Yao from my clerk and translating them into English.

Towards the end of 1946, when the rains had set in, I decided to move into a vacant house on a tobacco market about five miles from where I had first pitched my tent. I then started to make a census of the nearest village. Here the attitude of the people was markedly different and I established friendly and happy relationships with them. For some weeks I systematically made censuses of the surrounding villages, and got my first insight into the structural principles of Yao villages. I left this area to attend a conference of research officers of the Institute, and when I returned I pitched my tent in the village into which my personal servant had married. By this time I was speaking some of the language and had started to talk to people directly. I now began to establish a set of informants who would come to my tent in the afternoons and dictate texts to me in Yao on various topics of interest, which I immediately translated into English. The mornings I spent out in neighbouring villages. It was during this period that I gradually heard about the various ceremonies that were being performed and was able to attend them. My wife too was able to attend some of the women's ceremonies. Some months later I moved down to Kawinga's area and pitched my tent in one of the largest and most complex villages I could find and made a complete census of it. I chose this village so that it would be sufficiently close for me to attend Kawinga's court, which was the largest in the area. I left the field in September 1947, and in September 1948 returned to Chiwalo's village. I now engaged a new clerk who could speak no English and who came from the village in Chiwalo's area where I had originally settled. During my second trip I visited Jalasi, Katuli and Kalembo chiefdoms, all in different parts of the Yao country, and made village censuses in each.

The procedure I adopted in making village censuses was as follows. Usually I visited the headman a day or so in advance to explain my intention to him. Most of the villages I studied were fairly close to that in which I was camped so that the people

2: Mitchell E-5 (1946-1949) 1956 FT7 Yao FT7



125 knew as a rule what information I wanted. On an appointed day I went to the village in the early morning. My first task
● 124 was to make a rough sketch of the position of the huts and to number them. Then with the aid of some of the men of the village (who were usually the wardens of sorority-groups) I went from hut to hut completing a Rhodes-Livingstone Institute standard census form for each adult person who lived in the hut. Later I found that if I completed the census forms for certain key personalities who were dead, I could sometimes construct most of the genealogy of the village without having to question the headman any further. More commonly, however, especially in the larger and more complex villages, I found that it was necessary for me to meet the headman and some of the older men afterwards to complete the genealogy of the village. When I did this it was customary for the men of the village to gather in the common shelter or around me under the verandah of the hut where I was working. The women were not invited near, at least at the beginning of the interview. Soon, however, the men became more and more confused. At some stage or other they would begin shouting questions over to the women, who were sitting discreetly under the verandah of an adjoining hut or in the shade of a conveniently close tree, from where they could hear the proceedings. Eventually, almost without fail, the older women were brought closer and the difficulties straightened out. In time I became accustomed to this procedure and accepted the fact that the first genealogy would have to be discarded and a second made later with the help of the women.

135 It was during the house-to-house census that many valuable leads emerged. During the census-taking, for example, unusual types of marriage with kinsmen appeared which I was able to follow up immediately in terms of an actual case history; or, if it were likely to be embarrassing at that moment, I noted it down and made specific enquiries later, for the census-taking was usually done in public.

124 The quantitative material presented in Chapter IV on Prestige
126 and Rank among Village Headmen was collected at the chief's court. I worked with the chief's tax-clerk and one or two of the chief's councillors. We worked through the tax-register, and the councillors answered a set of questions about each village headman. In two areas the chiefs called the village head-

2: Mitchell E-5 (1946-1949) 1956 FT7 Yao FT7



men into a public meeting and each answered the questions personally. Where the information was not known, I made special enquiries to obtain it. Later I transferred this information on to small cards which I subsequently used in the statistical analysis. During my survey of Malemia chiefdom I was able to employ six African clerks whom I trained to record genealogies. They surveyed a 20 per cent random sample of villages in the chiefdom. The material from these genealogies has been transferred to Hollerith cards for statistical analysis at some future date. During this period, Mr. Carrall Wilcocks, who was then Agricultural Instructor at the Jeanes' School, and I were able to make a map with chain and compass of every garden cultivated by members of a large village. While the general results of this study have been included here, a detailed analysis is still to be made.

The material used in the chapters which deal with the pre-White times has been derived mainly from the published works quoted in the Bibliography. I was also able to consult records in the Central African Archives. By permission of the Nyasaland Government I was allowed to read through the District Books at Fort Johnston and Zomba, and through some of the files which contained information collected by early District Officers. I was also able to consult the detailed returns of the 1945 Census at the District Commissioner's office in Zomba. The Agricultural Officer at Fort Johnston, under whose jurisdiction the area where I was working fell, was kind enough to let me read some reports and to give me statistics of sales of tobacco and other agricultural produce at the Government-controlled markets, as well as details of rainfall and temperature.

The ideas in this book have been developed in a number of Rhodes-Livingstone Institute staff conferences and at seminars at Oxford. During a preliminary period of writing at Oxford between September 1947 and August 1948 I prepared the manuscript of what was later to become my contribution to the symposium *Seven Tribes of British Central Africa*. I cannot overemphasize the importance of this essay in setting the problems examined in this book and in clarifying my approach to them. It brought home to me more than anything else the truth in the aphorism: the hardest part of field work is writing it up.

code of morals is imparted which is far reaching for the social welfare. Macdonald makes the statement that " when a girl is initiated, she must find some man to be with her on her return; otherwise she will die." [1] Speaking with reserve as to what happened among the Amalungulu around Blantyre Mission thirty years ago, I believe that no such practice is or was part of the Machinga Yao ceremonies. I have heard similar stories from other European but I am inclined to discredit the whole idea as a practice among any section of Yao. Of the Anyanja, I cannot speak with the same conviction. Similarly I believe that the practice of artificial dilatation of the vagina is foreign to the Yao through possibly introduced in some places from the Swahili.

At *Lupanda* and *Chipoka*, the youth have to undergo a good deal of hardship which is all for their benefit, but year by year, as civilization progresses, greater numbers forego these ceremonies. Their manners and morals suffer in consequence, and one is forced to acknowledge with the " *old people* " that the younger generation, clothed in European clothes, with an air of smug self-conceit, no longer shows that decorum and self-respect which characterizes the older, unsophisticated natives. My experience with regard to the attitude of natives to their initiation ceremonies differs from those related in *Africana* and I am afraid that Macdonald's native friends [2] were laughing at the inquisitiveness of the white man and not at their own experiences.

In the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* for 1913,[3] Dr. Davey and I gave a short account of part of the ceremony at *Lupanda*. Since then, through the friendliness of some of the chiefs in Zomba district, I have been present at several more ceremonies. I have collected a number of fresh observations and made a complete set of sketches of the figures or images in relief made on the ground at one of these ceremonies. I have also a complete account of the boys' ceremonies from a celebrated master of ceremonies or *n'mishilo* as he is called, named Mlomola (Kampika) of Chowkamba, in his own words, with his own songs. In writing down the songs, I have simply recorded the words, without giving the many full and partial repeats, and I have never attempted to score down the airs to which they are sung.

In the account given below I shall follow Mlomola's practice, giving such variations as I myself have observed. It will be understood that each *n'mishilo* has his own way of doing things so that there may be many variations in detail.

*Lupanda*: Every year, a certain number of boys in a group of villages reach the age at which the ceremony is commonly performed. In response to requests made by the village headmen, the *chief* appoints a date on which the voyage shall be held; this is usually towards the end of the dry season (September) but before the long grass of the fresh has been burnt, as this affords the necessary privacy to those taking part.

[1] *Op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 100. [2] *Ibid.*, p. 100.

[3] H. S. Stannus and J. D. Davey, "The initiation ceremony for boys among the Yao of Nyasaland", *Journ. Anth. Inst., London*, 1913, vol. xlii, p. 229-242.

6: Mitchell E-5 (1946-1947) 1949 FT7 Yao FT7



impressed on people's memories and remembered by most of the people. Thus it was desirable to find a useful reference date between 1930 and 1940. It might be thought that the death of King George V would be memorable. However, though all who were old enough at the time could remember the witchfinders, only a few could remember the death of King George.

This skeleton chronology was filled in by events of more local significance. For example, Kawinga's brick house was built in 1929, the present Nyambi succeeded in 1933, &c. In addition, in particular hamlets there were men who had been in the Army, or had been to work in South Africa or Southern Rhodesia. Usually they could recall the date of going and sometimes of return, though they may have lost count of the intervening years. Such dates were often useful points. A small minority had actually recorded the dates of birth and death of children.

In addition to this, it was possible to fix the ages of the young children by reference to harvests, since the Yao reckon two years in retrospect, 'last year' meaning before the last harvest and 'the year before last' meaning the period before the harvest before last. Before the year before last, all time is merely *kale-kale*, the only indication of the period being the pitch of the voice in which it is said or the presence or absence of an exclamatory 'Ei!' before speaking.

Particular care was taken to secure the ages of women and the dates at which they had borne children. There was, as mentioned above, some reticence in mentioning the names of dead children, but this was usually met successfully by questioning the women's male relatives who were generally more communicative on these points. In spite of the care taken to obtain this information, it was impossible to fix the ages of six women in the sample, and they have been excluded from the major part of the analysis. In addition, there were thirty-nine men who were not available for questioning. These were all adults, the husbands of women in the hamlets. The Yao are matrilineal and matrilocal, and men tend to spend much of their time away from the hamlet of their relatives-in-law. Since they are in many ways strangers in the hamlets no information could be obtained about them.

### 6. The General Background to Fertility

All the hamlets visited were occupied by members of the Yao tribe. The Yao are an Islamized people who achieved the questionable distinction of being efficient slave raiders at the end of the nineteenth century. They are a matrilineal and predominantly matrilocal people living in hamlets of from about 5 to 100 huts or more.

*Table I. Age of Women at First Marriage*

| Present age | Age of women at first marriage | | | | | | | | | | | Total | Number of children born |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 10–11 | 12–13 | 14–15 | 16–17 | 18–19 | 20–21 | 22–23 | 24–25 | 26–27 | 28–29 | 30 and over | | |
| Under 30 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 16 | 9 | 6 | 1 | 3 | .. | .. | .. | 33 | 167 |
| 30–45 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 11 | 8 | 6 | 6 | 3 | .. | 1 | 1 | 45 | 163 |
| Over 45 | .. | 0 | 1 | 3 | 8 | 3 | 1 | 0 | .. | 1 | .. | 17 | 104 |
| Totals | 7 | 12 | 13 | 30 | 25 | 15 | 8 | 6 | .. | 2 | 1 | 100 | 170 |